



BILLY CALZADA/STAFF

Brother Charles at the Little Flower School watches as students Jasmin Jimenez (from left), Michelle Castillo, Allison Castillo and Rachel Arrey tend tomatoes.

Drive hopes to unite neighbors with soil

Meetings will test S.A.'s interest in community gardens.

BY AMY DORSETT
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

When it's time for middle school students at the Little Shrine School to head to the science lab, they step outdoors, plunge their hands into the soil and nurture tomatoes, peppers and cantaloupes.

Eventually the fruits — and vegetables — of their labor make their way into the cafeteria and onto the tables of the church's monastery. In the process, students learn about ecosystems, water resources and erosion.

And in turn, they may teach a thing or two to the city, as they are a working example of a concept local leaders hope will take root.

This month, the Bexar Land Trust will host a series of meetings to gauge neighborhood interest in community gardens, which have been wildly successful in other cities.

The gardens, which can include a mix of pocket parks, playgrounds, and flower and vegetable plots, can vary greatly in size and operate in numerous ways. The general idea is for them to be nestled in neighborhoods, open to the public and maintained by a co-op of interested parties.

"There are community gar-

See S.A. AREAS/9A

dens throughout San Antonio, and they come and go. It hasn't been an organized effort," explained Julie Koppenheffer, executive director of the land trust. "What we're trying to do is initiate an effort to incorporate all gardens that exist and want to be included, and encourage new ones."

The community meetings will be held in the East, West and South portions of the city because a nearly \$25,000 grant from the Kronkosky Charitable Foundation dictated that those areas be targeted. However, stakeholders on the North Side will be invited to participate in the effort, Koppenheffer said.

"The invitation list is quite broad," she said. "We envision it being communitywide, including the North Side."

After feedback from the neighborhoods, three to four pilot projects will be started, with seedlings likely being planted next spring.

Linda Hardberger, the wife of Mayor Phil Hardberger, is chairing a community garden committee for the land trust.

"There is a great deal of interest and receptiveness throughout the community to re-establishing open space, to interact in a natural environment," she said. "What we're hearing from people all over the city is, people are interested in it."

Betsy Johnson, executive director of the American Community Gardening Association, which will host a workshop here in July, said the concept of such gardens has existed in the United States since American Indians dominated the land and colonials opened common gardens. In World War II, there was a movement for Victory Gardens, so the country could be self-sufficient in wartime, and some of those are in operation today.

The modern common garden movement came about in the mid-1970s.

"Folks were fed up with vacant lots and wanted to do something about it," Johnson said. "At this point just about every urban area has common gardens."

In Austin, the gardens are so popular that folks are on waiting lists to be assigned a plot of earth to tend.

Gardens can be small, from the size of one residential lot, to large, ambling green spaces that stretch for blocks.

Rules of operation can be just as varied, but in general, individuals are assigned plots for vegetable gardens. Having

BEXAR LAND TRUST: WHAT IT IS AND DOES

The Bexar Land Trust is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creatively protecting land and natural, cultural and historic resources in Bexar County and the surrounding area for the good of present and future generations.

The trust works cooperatively to foster partnerships with local, state and federal agencies, landowners and community groups.

The trust may be reached at (210) 222-8430 or at www.bexarlandtrust.org.

helps ensure its success.

Bexar Land Trust officials, who said each community will dictate what rules and what kind of garden there will be, hope to establish a variety of gardens — therapeutic, relaxation, flower, vegetable and parks — on various kinds of land: empty lots, schools, libraries, churches, community centers and housing authority projects.

"We want a neighborhood-based garden, where people don't have to get in their cars to get there," Koppenheffer said.

The gardens could have direct benefit beyond providing a manicured patch of green — vegetables harvested there could be used to improve nutrition and fatten the bounty of food banks.

And the gardens can enhance the sense of community, Linda Hardberger said.

"It's such a wonderful way for neighborhoods to learn who their neighbors are," she said. "A lot of problems come from not knowing who your neighbors are and not talking to them."

Back at the Little Shrine School, on the grounds of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Little Flower on the West Side, students are discovering they have green thumbs and the power to enhance their community.

"With the Power of Flowers program in the elementary grades, we teach them the need for growing flowers and beautifying their neighborhoods," said July Moreno de Lopez, executive director of the basilica.

"And in the youth organic garden for middle school students, they're being educated in the ecological importance of organic gardens. It serves as a lab-like setting."